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ABSTRACT

Career development theories and approaches have been criticized for lack of applicability to diverse populations. Traditional career development theories and models assume that: everyone has a free choice among careers; career development is a linear, progressive, rational process; and individualism, autonomy and centrality of work are universal values. Career development research sometimes neglects important determinants such as racism, sexism, family background and opportunity structure in racial and ethnic minority populations. Career development practitioners must be prepared to work with clients in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways and should be aware of factors that affect the career choices of diverse individuals. These factors include world view (such as cooperation/communality versus competitive/individualistic, individualist versus collectivist), identity (racial, gender, group, bicultural), values (career, cultural), and context (internal and external barriers and resources). Culturally competent practitioners recognize how and why individuals' career-related experiences might be different and think outside their own cultural frames of reference in assisting people with their career development. (Contains 15 references.) (CG)

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Career Development of Diverse Populations

by Sandra Kerka

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Career development theories and approaches have been criticized for lack of applicability to diverse populations (Walsh et al. 2001). Research on career issues for these groups has been described as limited and sparse (ibid.). However, cultural diversity is a fact of life in the U.S. population and work force, and career development practitioners must be prepared to work with clients in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways. Although individuals and specific groups have different experiences, there are some common career-related issues faced by diverse populations. Their career choices may be constrained by socialization, access to guidance and assessment, tracking into certain fields, societal and self-stereotypes, isolation from networks, and early schooling experiences (ibid.). Barriers to career development may include lack of developmental feedback or mentors, discrimination in promotion/transfer, tokenism, hostility, plateauing, less access to training, perceived isolation, stress, or self-imposed performance pressure (ibid.). This Digest examines some of the research and issues involved in multicultural career development. Rather than trying to address all aspects of diversity, the focus is on racial and ethnic minority populations.

What inadequacies have been identified in career development theories and models? Because many of them had been created and tested on limited samples (usually white, middle class, and male), their applicability to a wider spectrum of the population has been questioned. When they are applied to members of diverse groups, different results are sometimes interpreted as deficits, for example, claims that minorities lack career maturity (Flores, Spanierman, and Obasi 2003). Theories about how and why people choose careers have been based on assumptions such as the following: everyone has a free choice among careers; career development is a linear, progressive, rational process for all; and individualism, autonomy, and centrality of work are universal values (Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien 2002; Flores and Heppner 2002). Research on career development sometimes neglects important determinants such as racism, sexism, family background, and opportunity structure (Walsh et al. 2001). In many studies, socioeconomic status and ethnicity/race are confounded (ibid.), making it difficult to determine the pertinence of findings to specific populations. When culture or ethnicity is considered, most definitions assume that culture is "static, unitary, essentialist, and all encompassing" and that "identity is a fixed and stable structure" (Alfred 2001, p. 111).

Influences on the Career Development of Diverse Groups

Career development processes based on traditional person-environment fit theories involve identifying an individual's skills, abilities, and interests; understanding personality, values, and beliefs; and matching these variables with appropriate potential careers (Flores et al. 2003). Researchers have investigated other factors that affect the career choices of diverse individuals in order to enhance the relevance of these theories and models. These factors include world view, identity, values, and context.

World View

World views or ways of perceiving and being in the world are a significant distinguishing characteristic of cultural groups. Walsh et al. (2001) cite the work of Cheatham and Nobles in comparing differences between African (cooperation, communality) and European (competition, individualism) world views, noting how the interplay between the two may influence the career behavior of African Americans. Juntunen et al.'s (2001) interviews with Native Americans identified aspects of their world view that affect career development such as sense of place and family/community orientation. Like many Hispanic Americans, the high-achieving Latinas in Gomez et al.'s (2001) study manifested a collectivist/familial world view.

The individualist-collectivist (I-C) continuum is one of several basic value orientations that make up world views. Hartung et al. (2002) studied the relationship between this orientation and the occupational choices, career planning behaviors, work values, and family background of 269 college students of African, Asian, Hispanic, and European American descent. They found some significant though moderate relationships between I-C and the values students sought in work, the career choices they made, and the ways they planned to achieve career goals. Noordin, Williams, and Zimmer (2003) compared Malaysian and Australian managers using an I-C scale. Although Malaysian managers were more collectivistic, the two groups were not significantly different in career identity and career planning commitment. The researchers speculate that these results may reflect a shift toward individualism in Malaysian culture or an indication of a collectivist culture adapting to global change. Their findings suggest that, although world view should be taken into account in career development, it should not lead to an overly deterministic view of its influence on diverse individuals.

Identity

Several facets make up identity, including individual self-definition, gender identity, and group (cultural or ethnic) identification. Alfred (2001) cites three reasons why understanding group identity is important in career development: (1) group identities are important components of self-concept for most people, (2) recognition and preservation of group identities is of great significance to some individuals, and (3) group identities influence how others interact with us. Individual, gender, and group identities played an important role in the career success of African American tenured female faculty at a predominantly white university. These women created positive images of self-definition as black women and practiced bicultural life strategies that enabled them to manage white academic culture (ibid.).

Racial identity theory depicts a continuum of self-definitions ranging from conformity to dissonance, resistance, and awareness. Walsh et al. (2001) reviewed research showing that racial identity significantly predicted foreclosure of career choices, career-related self-efficacy, and the ability to use bicultural strategies for managing two cultural contexts. Although biculturalism can be a positive coping mechanism, it may also contribute to stress, for example, when an individual is the only member of his/her cultural group in a nontraditional occupation. When Carter and Constantine (2000) studied racial/ethnic identities of African- and Asian-American students, students' position on the continuum influenced the types of careers they valued and the extent to which they foreclosed their career options. Individual differences in these findings suggest that "the career paths of people of color can be understood by taking into account the psychological variations within racial and ethnic group identifications" (ibid., p. 185). One source of these individual differences that must be taken into account is the salience of racial/ethnic identity to the individual, which helps explain the variance and diversity within a cultural group (Walsh et al. 2001).

Another within-group identity variable is acculturation, "the degree to which individuals participate in and adopt the secondary culture of the dominant society" (ibid., p. 183). Zuniga, Skaruppa, and Powell (2000) depict acculturation as a continuum of responses: cultural resistance, shift, incorporation, or transmutation. The five Hispanic corporate managers they studied believed that acculturation and career advancement were related. Cultural resistance impeded advancement, whereas an appreciation of both cultural influences had a positive effect on career goals. The Plains Indians interviewed by Juntunen et

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al. (2001) expressed orientations that reflected one of three stages of acculturation: traditional, bicultural, or western. These orientations were either facilitators or barriers for their career development.

Values

Individual, cultural, and work-related values influence career choices, decisions, and development. Brown (2002) proposes an inclusive theory of occupational choice based on values, noting that "there is considerable diversity within the values systems of people from the same cultural groups and extensive overlap in the cultural values held by people from different cultural groups" (p. 49). He presents research findings supporting several propositions about the role of values in career choice, success, and satisfaction, including differences between people with individualistic and collective social values. The Latina professionals studied by Gomez et al. (2000) shared the strong cultural values of familism and collectivism, although their career aspirations often conflicted with cultural and gender role expectations. Their optimism, persistence, and capacity for reframing enabled them to integrate their personal and cultural values with their career choices and achievements. Community college students from four cultural groups (white, black, Hispanic, Asian) displayed significant differences on a number of career values (Teng, Morgan, and Anderson 2001). For example, having a good starting income was more important to blacks; job security, performance, and use of prior experience were more important to blacks and Hispanics. However, the size of these effects was small, again signifying individual differences within as well as between groups.

Context

The notion that "occupational success can be largely attributable to individual merit has never applied to everyone because of pervasive and powerful contextual barriers" such as racial and gender discrimination and income disparities (Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien 2002, p. 294). The influence of the external context or opportunity structure may be real or it may be perceived: an individual's experiences and concerns may contribute to overly optimistic or pessimistic perceptions of opportunity (Jackson and Nutini 2002). Jackson and Nutini's work with multicultural middle school students identified contextual barriers and resources affecting career-related learning: (1) external barriers (unsafe environment, low income, negative social support, discrimination); (2) internal barriers (negative self efficacy, negative academic performance, perception of equal opportunity); (3) external resources (role models, social and cultural support); and (4) internal resources (bicultural competence, coping efficacy). Constantine et al. (1998) found that, although youth of color do not differ from the majority in their career development interests or aspirations, they tend to have lower occupational expectations due to internal challenges: perceptions of lack of opportunity, limited self-knowledge because of fewer opportunities for work experience, and few opportunities to develop self-efficacy. External challenges they may face include environmental factors that diminish quality of life, poor quality of available schooling, and bias and stereotyping in the amount and type of counseling they receive.

Toward More Inclusive Career Development

As more research has been done (and remains to be done) in this area, new models incorporating these findings are being developed. A model for culturally appropriate career development that was developed by Fouad and Bingham and extended by others (Flores et al. 2003; Walsh et al. 2001) has the following elements:

1. Establishment of a culturally appropriate relationship
2. Information gathering that is culturally encompassing
3. Identification of cognitive, social, emotional, environmental, behavioral, and external influences
4. Assessment of cultural spheres of influence on career choice
5. Assessment of cultural, gender, and efficacy variables
6. Traditional career assessments
7. Selection, administration, and interpretation of culturally appropriate instruments
8. Career development practitioners' awareness of their own world views, identity salience, values, and attitudes

Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002) add an ecological perspective, which recognizes that each person operates within a unique ecosystem consisting of multiple factors at the individual, interpersonal, and broader sociocultural levels. Helping individuals develop in their careers may involve identifying coping skills, addressing cognitive processes that shape their transactions within the environment, or working to change the environment and make systems more helpful or affirming. Paying attention to diversity issues in career development does not mean ignoring differences or overemphasizing stereotypes. Culturally competent practitioners recognize how and why individuals' career-related experiences might be different and think outside their own cultural frames of reference in assisting people with career development (Flores et al. 2003).

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